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THE GREAT CAHOKIA MOUND

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Within the last few years there has appeared in various publications the statement that it has been definitely ascertained the great Cahokia Mound is but a natural hill, and not the product of human agency. In the August, 1914, number of *Science*, page 312, an eminent Illinois scientist makes this positive assertion; "A study of the materials composing the so-called Monks or Cahokia Mound, in Madison County, Ill., establishes, beyond doubt, that it is not of artificial origin, as has been so generally held, but that it is a remnant remaining after the erosion of the alluvial deposits, which at one time filled the valley of the Mississippi, in the locality known as the 'Great American Bottoms.'"

Again; a professor in our State University said, in an address he delivered to the Illinois State Historical Society, in May, 1916; "It has been recently shown that the great Cahokia Mound is really a natural formation which the Indians have cut into the desired form." It would have been a genuine satisfaction to me—and no doubt to the few others in this State who are still interested in the study of Indian antiquities in Illinois—if those learned scholars had cited their authorities, or specified their sources of information, in support of their statement regarding the Mound.

But it has since become known that the method adopted by the writer in *Science*, above quoted, for studying "the materials composing the so-called Monks, or Cahokia Mound," was to procure, by boring, or digging, at various places and at varying depths in the mound samples of the

materials composing it, and then repeating this procedure in the bluffs three miles farther east. The samples so secured were later examined analyzed, and compared in the laboratory, and, of course, pronounced to be identical. Nevertheless, that strictly scientific test proves nothing whatever regarding the mechanical construction of the Mound. There never has been any controversy among archaeologists concerning the kind or quality of the materials composing the greater part of it. A very slight examination of it will convince any one that it is the same as that constituting the superficial portion of the bluffs. But no analysis or microscopic inspection will explain how that huge mass of loess, or drift clay, was conveyed to its present location on the plain near Cahokia Creek. Whether deposited there by action of glacial currents, or every pound of it carried there from the bluffs by the Indians, the test applied by the Illinois scientist would show precisely the same result.

In the large Indian mounds which, in times past, I have personally explored, I found their mode of construction plainly apparent. While built altogether of drift clay, there was seen in many places slight variations in color or texture of the material that distinctly defined each basketful or deerskin load, dumped down by the dusky workers, giving to the whole a mottled appearance. And further, the builders of that class of mounds, while erecting them camped and lived upon them as was evidenced by remains, here and there throughout the structure, of their camp fires in ashes, charcoal, and burnt stones, with bones of birds, fishes, deer, bears, etc, and other debris of their repasts, and broken pottery, scattered around.

McAdams, and others have stated that, long ago, a Mr. Hill built a residence on the top of the Mound, and there sunk a well down to its base, meeting all the way down, proofs of the Mound's artificial construction in numerous fragments of pottery, flint chips, charcoal, etc.; not a word of which is true. In 1808 a small colony of

Monks of the Order of LaTrappe secured from Major Nicholas Jarrot, of Cahokia, a tract of 400 acres of land, on part of which the big Mound is situated, with the view of establishing one of their monasteries there. Preparatory thereto they built two log cabins on the broad terrace at the south side of the Mound, and a few other cabins on the small mounds near by. Owing to the unhealthy malarial climate, and other causes, their colonizing enterprise proved a failure, and in March, 1819, those of them who had not died sold the land, and returned to France.

In 1831 a part of the same land, including the Mound, was purchased by Mr. T. Ames Hill, a native of Massachusetts, who had resided several years in Kentucky, and for some time thereafter in the city of St. Louis. He at once built a dwelling house on the terrace where the principal Trappist cabin formerly stood, and some time later, dug a well in that terrace almost down to its base, nearly thirty feet. But finding no water, or promising prospect of it, he abandoned further search for it there, and refilled the well with the clay taken out of it. After Mr. Hill's death his widow resided at, or near, Collinsville until her death at an advanced age. When asked what human remains had been found intermixed with the clay removed from that well in the process of digging it, she said she did not know of any as she paid no attention to the work when it was going on.

The last proprietor of the Mound, and its surrounding two hundred acres, was Hon. Thomas T. Ramey, whose heirs still own it. When he took possession of it, nearly half a century ago, there was on the north end of the Mound, about thirty feet above its base, a little scrubby pine tree, the only one of its species known in that locality. It was a conspicuous object; and the oddity of that lone pine in that odd place, stimulating the natural propensity of man for the esoteric and mysterious, had established in that community the belief that it was planted there by

the builders of the Mound to mark the entrance to a secret chamber within it, in which perhaps they had stored gold and silver objects of great value brought by them from the far distant empire of the Incas. So persistent and widespread was the notion that Mr. Ramey was at length persuaded to investigate it. Accordingly he dug a tunnel from that point some sixty or seventy feet in direction of the long axis of the Mound, and, of course, found no chamber, or any indication that the dry, compact clay had ever been disturbed since it was first deposited there.

In that random exploration Mr. Ramey presented a rare opportunity for a careful and satisfactory examination of the materials of which the Mound was constituted, as well as the manner of its construction, to be inferred therefrom. But, though he was a very substantial citizen of Madison County, and a creditable representative of it in the 28th and 36th General Assemblies, he was not a scientist, or specially devoted to the study of Indian antiquities. And it seems there was no one else in his neighborhood who was, at that time.

I have given the result of my examination, some time later, of the drift clay excavated from that tunnel in the July, 1909, number of this *Journal*, page 91. That examination, together with Mr. Ramey's account of his excavation, and close inspections of the substance of the Mound, exposed in its many deep gashes and gullies of erosion, led me to *believe* that it was originally an outlier of the bluff formation left there by receding glacial currents, and subsequently modeled in geometrical proportions by the Indians. But I do not *know* that to be so; nor does any one else. And until the great tumulus is thoroughly explored by systematic trenching or tunneling we cannot be positive of the mode of its construction.